

# Thinking laughter beyond humour: Atmospheric refrains and ethical indeterminacies in spaces of care

Emmerson, Philip

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# Thinking laughter beyond humour: Atmospheric refrains and ethical indeterminacies in spaces of care

**Phil Emmerson**

University of Birmingham, UK



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## Abstract

Despite the range of subjects tackled by affective and emotional geographers, laughter has received relatively little attention. Those who do discuss laughter, do so for the most part in terms of the “humorous” moments that precede it. This paper proposes a distinctly different approach: shifting focus away from humour to foreground laughter as an analytical category. Through this, I argue that we can understand laughter as a phenomenon in its own right, without reducing it to humorous intentionality (even when there is humour present). This allows further analytical precision within discussions of laughter particularly around the ways in which it affects bodies and spaces. The paper first discusses laughter as more-than-representational; as having transpersonal and atmospheric spatialities, capable of affecting and being affected beyond its relationship with humour. The refrain is then deployed as a conceptual means through which we can grasp laughter’s indeterminate capacities to generate spaces, atmospheres and subjectivities. Drawing on insights from three months of ethnographic research spent working in nursing care homes, I illustrate these conceptions of laughter in terms of the ways it can enact, disrupt, and reconfigure different relationships between bodies and space. This case study thus prompts discussion of the ethical implications of thinking laughter in this manner, particularly the need to develop an ethos for laughter that remains open to its potential for multiple (and often unexpected) outcomes.

## Keywords

Laughter, refrains, atmospheres, ethics, nonrepresentational theories, ethnography, nursing care homes

Shared laughter, which is often about returning laughter with laughter, involves sharing a direction, or following a line. The repetition of such gestures makes a point, as a point that creates its impressions. (Ahmed, 2006: 556)

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## Corresponding author:

Phil Emmerson, School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham B1 52TT, UK.

Email: [PX991@bham.ac.uk](mailto:PX991@bham.ac.uk)

## Introduction

Parvulescu (2010) argues that most theories of laughter are not concerned with laughter at all. Instead they position it as the response to something else – humour, jokes, the ridiculous or the grotesque – and it is this that they end up theorising. In geographic work, laughter has mostly remained a fleeting referent, although there is a growing body of work with laughter much closer to its core (e.g. Bissell et al., 2012; Brigstocke, 2014; Dittmer, 2013; Emmerson, 2016; Hynes and Sharpe, 2010; Macpherson, 2008; Ridanpää, 2014; Sharpe and Hynes, 2016). This work however, for the most part, again seems to seek out the comic and the humorous, rather than laughter itself.

This paper therefore proposes a distinctly different approach to thinking about laughter: shifting focus away from humour and instead foregrounding laughter as an analytical category. Through this laughter can be attended to as phenomenon in its own right – without reducing it to humour (even when humour is present). This is not to downgrade humour, but rather to recognise humour and laughter as different phenomena, and thus to establish further analytical precision within discussions of laughter itself. In contrast to many accounts, laughter is therefore positioned as exceeding the intentionality of humour and of laughs themselves (Hughes, 2016; Nancy, 1993), and therefore as capable of creating trajectories of its own accord. The paper demonstrates this empirically, through attending to laughter in spaces of care, drawing on three months of ethnographic research working within nursing care homes. Reflecting on these empirical elements thus leads me to argue for a new approach to the ethics of laughter; one that avoids universal arguments, and instead remains open to laughter's potential to enact multiple (and often unexpected) outcomes.

I thus start by positioning laughter as transpersonal, and as having atmospheric spatialities, capable of affecting and being affected beyond its relationship with humour. The refrain is then deployed as a valuable means through which we can grasp laughter's (indeterminate) capacities to generate spaces, atmospheres and subjectivities. Empirically the paper explores laughter within nursing care homes, highlighting its capacities to enact, disrupt, and reconfigure relationships between bodies and space in ways that are not reducible to humour. The discussion considers the ethical implications of thinking about laughter in this manner, arguing for an ethos that is less rigid in what constitutes good or bad encounters. I conclude by reiterating my urge to adopt more precision when thinking about laughter and suggesting the significance of this different approach.

## #choosehappiness

A man boards a train heading for Boechout. He stands, leaning against a support railing, removing an iPad from his bag and unfolding the cover. The train is full of subdued, silent passengers, rocking back and forth as the train jostles along the tracks. The bald man, headphones in his ears, stares at the screen of his iPad, starting to chuckle quietly. His chuckles give way to a much louder laugh, causing his head to rise and neck elongate. The other passengers take note, glancing at him with inquisitive looks. A couple smirk, looking at each other and then back to the man. His laugh intensifies. As it grows louder, more people begin to look, some turning around in their seats. The passengers smile with what looks like a mixture of nervousness and joy. A small giggle erupts from one passenger, her shoulders shaking as she tries to hold it in. Ever more, passengers start to laugh openly, their bodies jostling in line with the man, other passengers, and the movements of the train. Before long the train carriage is full of people laughing, some harder than others. The passengers look at each other, sharing in the bald man's laughter at... well whatever he is laughing at. Suddenly, three passengers unzip hoodies to reveal Coca-Cola branded T-shirts

and they start moving down the train, handing out cans of soda and cards with a smiling face on them. Our image cuts to a red background with the slogan “Happiness starts with a smile” followed by the universally familiar Coca-Cola branding with “#choosehappiness” below it.<sup>1</sup>

## More-than-representational laughter

The advert described above may be slightly sinister, both in its staged nature, and the implied connection between choosing Coca-cola and choosing happiness. Yet it acts as a reminder that laughter can do things that are *somewhat* separate to its causes. Parvulescu (2010) argues that scholarship around laughter remains too focused on humour; overwhelmingly analysed through three causal theories – superiority, incongruity and release/relief theory – which position the body, as an *individual* subject or object, in relation to laughter (e.g. Billig, 2005; Critchley, 2002). Parvulescu (2010) thus advocates a “(re)turn to laughter”, through which *laughter’s* effects, movements, and meanings can be understood, without being reduced to a representation of the preceding humorous event.

There has been a small but significant engagement with humour that has to some extent moved away from the theories laid out above, instead considering its more-than-representational elements. This work is characterised by attempts to understand the (molecular) movements that humour can generate, the capacities that this affords to different bodies, and thus the complex ways in which power is mobilised by it at various scales (e.g. Bissell et al., 2012; Brigstocke, 2014; Dittmer, 2013; Sharpe et al., 2014). Sharpe et al. (2014), for instance, discuss the comedy performances of Stewart Lee, arguing that their aesthetics enable audiences to generate new “affective habits” through which prejudices might be altered and made less certain. Elsewhere, Hynes and Sharpe (2010) note that humour affirms already existing desires and the social constructions through which they are made into moral judgements. Brigstocke (2014: 85) similarly suggests humour as offering an “alternative cultural vehicle for making the limits of socio-biological life visible and felt at the affective registers of experience”. Humour is thus seen as a means of accessing power geometries to enforce control onto bodies in subtle ways (Bissell et al., 2012), or to resist these structures through modes of creative interruption (Brigstocke, 2014; Sharpe et al., 2014), or creating “sensuous solidarities” (Routledge, 2012).

While these nonrepresentational discussions of humour do provide a more nuanced interpretation of its workings and power structures than traditional humour theories, they still fall under the category of scholarship that Parvulescu (2010) critiques – namely analytic focus on humour rather than laughter. That is not to say that laughter is completely absent in this work. Laughter is noted to be affirmative (Hynes and Sharpe, 2010); linked to violence (Brigstocke, 2014); inseparable from fear (Brown and Penttinen, 2013); and a unique form of communication (Billig, 2005). My contention, however, is that in most cases a form of lexical slippage occurs whereby laughter and humour become synonymous, and thus discussions of “laughter” almost always equate to a discussion of humour. Hynes and Sharpe’s (2010) “*Yea-saying Laughter*” for instance, is premised on a discussion of laughter but seems to merge “laughter” and “humour” without necessarily distinguishing between the two (see also Brigstocke, 2014; Douglas, 2015 for a similar impasse).

The problem arises therefore as to how we might think of laughter without reducing it to humour. Bataille argues that we cannot know the causes of laughter, because laughter emerges from the “unknowable” itself, and therefore trying to understand it through humour transforms it into something different (Bataille and Michelson, 1986). Nancy (1993) subsequently shifts the problem: questioning laughter’s presence and *how* it comes

to be known. Laughter, he argues, emerges as “affection” rather than representation, and occurs always “in-between” – in-between aesthetics, desires, and modes of subjectivity.<sup>2</sup> Also influenced by Bataille, Macpherson (2008) offers a distinction: humour as involving the intellect, with laughter differing in that it is a muscular phenomenon, not always controlled or regulated by the subject. Dittmer (2013: 499) therefore “crudely” maps humour onto “the discursive” and laughter onto the “affective”. Ultimately Dittmer argues that humour and laughter cannot be teased apart, yet Macpherson (2008) notes that there are times when laughter has no clear link to humour: when we laugh and don’t know why. In other words, as Hughes (2016) suggests, laughter itself is not reducible the intentionality of a pre-existing (humorous) subject, but rather produces the subject through its occurrence (see also Sharpe et al., 2014).

We might therefore consider laughter as transpersonal, rather than the property of individual subjective bodies (Ahmed, 2004). The transpersonal properties of laughter are perhaps more obvious than with some emotions. On the one hand, laughter is firmly situated in the materiality of the body. Particular sites within the body move to produce laughter – the diaphragm rhythmically contracts, the neck elongates, and the mouth opens (Parvulescu, 2010) – and are moved because of it – bellies, breasts, arms, legs, and heads shake with laughter (Bakhtin, 1984; Mbembe, 2001). On the other hand, these material movements are excessive – overflowing the bounds of the body as they project sound outwards, but also exceeding representation through generating affective intra/inter-actions within and between different bodies (Colls, 2007).

This idea of laughter as transpersonal can be seen within Macpherson’s (2008) discussion of laughter’s contagious capacities. She argues that laughter itself can provoke laughter in others but also that people who are already laughing may find it more difficult to stop – as the Coke advert demonstrates. Contagious laughter means “opening ourselves to the present moment, the flow and rhythm of laughter” (Macpherson, 2008: 1083). In this way, laughter can be seen to enact modes of relational sociability between different bodies, which in turn *generate* “contagious subjectivities” (Lawtoo, 2011) “born” out of the affections of laughter itself (Nancy, 1993). Understanding laughter as transpersonal however also recognises its relationality with other elements of the spaces in which it occurs:

Attending to the affective transmissions between subjects means addressing ‘surges of emotion or passion’ and their contagious qualities and how, for example, smells, sounds, chemicals, rhythms and vibrations work to align people with others and against other others. (Closs Stephens, 2016: 185)

Because laughter operates through a mixture of material (perceptive) and affective qualities, that disperse across, and intersect with both space and bodies (human and nonhuman), we might also think of laughter as affectively atmospheric (Anderson, 2009) – a distributed, yet palpable, quality of environmental immersion that is sensed by bodies but remains somewhat ethereal (McCormack, 2008). Indeed, within everyday language, we might well describe the tone or feel of laughter as atmospheric. The notion of atmosphere also enables a thinking that aligns with Bataille (1986) and Nancy’s (1993) conceptions of laughter as pre-subjective – atmospheres occurring “before and alongside the formation of subjectivity” (Anderson, 2009: 78). Each atmosphere thus forms a “singular” event within space (McCormack, 2013), yet it is important to appreciate that atmospheres can, and will, be experienced differently by different bodies (Bissell, 2010), informed in part by historical processes of interaction between bodies and spaces (Edensor, 2012).

This is an important recognition in moving away from some of the more universalising tendencies within affective thinking, which has been critiqued as verging on disembodied

philosophical abstraction (Nayak, 2010; Tolia-Kelly, 2006). Feminist and postcolonial scholars have thus called for more attention to be paid to bodily difference within “affective geographies”. Nayak (2010: 2371) argues that there is a need to understand how “a constellation of feelings, practices, and imaginaries breathe life” into the ways that differently situated bodies can affect and be affected. This is vital when thinking about laughter, with already well documented effects of culture, gender, race, and ability on the ways that bodies laugh and are affected by humour/laughter (Douglas, 2015; Macpherson, 2008; Mbembe, 2001).

Overall, in thinking about laughter as *more-than* a representation of humour, I have stressed the need to think about laughter as transpersonal and atmospheric, occurring between subjects and as generating subjects themselves. Laughter is also, however, spatio-temporally contingent, depending both on immediate and historical contexts. The question arises therefore as to how we might approach laughter, given these contingencies and therefore its indeterminacy. To paraphrase McCormack (2013: 7) how might we recognise laughter as “stretching out across and between bodies”, but also continuing to “involve those same bodies and their ongoing spatiotemporal differentiation”? In other words: how does laughter organise already “existing” subjects, whilst simultaneously generating new ones? Following McCormack therefore, the next section deploys the refrain, as a conceptual tool, to deal with these questions.

## Refrains of laughter

Everyday understandings of the refrain position it as a rhythmically repeated element of a song or poem, that has lyrical or melodic consistency to it. As Gerlach (2015: 282) writes:

In music, the refrain is the talismanic referent point in a song or composition, a repetition to which a tune is anchored, and often the cathartic moment of vibratory crescendo and resonance in which all singers and instruments enjoin.

Following Deleuze and Guattari, however, the refrain takes on another, only partially related, conception within nonrepresentational theories. As McCormack (2013) notes, a refrain can be anything that adds structure to an otherwise chaotic world. Refrains may appear at consistent rhythmic intervals, and be exactly repeated; yet they do not necessarily have to be this way, sometimes occurring in slightly different forms and at uneven intervals (see Stewart, 2010).

This moves the refrain away from a purely musical term. Deleuze and Guattari (1994: 120) for instance describe refrains of colour, posture, and architecture. Slogans (Anderson, 2014; Closs Stephens, 2016); maps (Gerlach, 2015); sports commentary, dance and other rhythmic movements (McCormack, 2002, 2003, 2005, 2013); and even the arguments of human geography as a discipline (Gerlach and Jellis, 2015; McCormack, 2010, 2012); have all been positioned by geographers as refrains capable of drawing together blocks of space time, and marking out some consistency within an otherwise differentiating world (McCormack, 2013).

Crucially, refrains are not simply aesthetic qualities but rather capture the (multiple) ways in which “territories” are expressed: e.g. the ways in which different animals use many methods (sounds, smells, etc.) to mark their territories (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). Refrains should therefore not be thought of as predetermined functions but rather as modes of “valence” that can draw and hold multiplicities together, but can also interrupt the existing functionality of space times, “deterritorialising” them and “reterritorialising” them into different forms, capable of doing different things (Dewsbury, 2011).



I contend therefore, that laughter can be understood as a refrain – something Deleuze and Guattari (1986: 41–42) also allude to within their discussion of Kafka’s laughter. As the Coke advert demonstrates, laughter can disrupt the feel of spaces, deterritorialising and reterritorialising them towards different modes of relation between bodies, thus generating space times that have a different atmospheric feel. Atmospheres and refrains are therefore connected concepts (McCormack, 2013): the refrain providing a mechanism for explaining the ways in which certain atmospheres are drawn together, and atmospheres in turn capturing *some* sense of the territories that refrains produce. We can therefore understand laughter as a refrain that draws out an atmospheric territory with a particular “felt” quality. This atmosphere *can* perform deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation: inflecting bodies’ powers to act – either increasing or decreasing them – and thus changing space itself (Duff, 2016).

Again, these capacities have been noted in relation to humour. Bissell et al. (2012), for instance, argue that an excess of affect within humour generates atmospheres which soften “barriers” and thus increase the capacities of bodies to pay attention to disciplinary messages (e.g. an airline safety demonstration). Similarly, Brigstocke (2014) describes the ways in which humour in 20th-century Montmartre helped to develop a carnivalesque atmosphere, thus enabling new modes of corporeal and affective critique. The underlying assumption in these analyses remains that humour and laughter are doing the same “work” and thus that examining humour allows insight into the power of laughter – the argument that this article contests.

Positioning *laughter* as a refrain however, captures a sense of indeterminacy – affirming the idea of “sometimes” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 312). Laughter-refrains *sometimes* afford bodies with increased capacities for action, through drawing them together (Routledge, 2012), offering (atmospheric) modes of critique (Bissell et al., 2012), transforming corporeal experiences of space (Brigstocke, 2014); yet *sometimes* they reduce capacities, through discipline (Douglas, 2015), ridicule (Billig, 2005), or exclusion (Kotthoff, 2006). Indeed, *sometimes*, they do both, to different bodies at the same time; or, *sometimes* they do neither. The fundamental point is that because laughter-refrains operate between bodies and pre-subjectively, their outcomes can be neither fully determined in advance, nor always attributed to the intentionalities of laughers themselves (Hughes, 2016; Nancy, 1993). In this way, laughter maintains the potential for what Williams (2016) describes as “nascent creativity” – a capacity to create something new, out of the relations between corporeality, materiality and affectivity themselves rather than through cognitive agencies (recalling Macpherson’s (2008) distinctions between humour and laughter).

As such, the refrain offers a means through which we can grasp the multiplicity and the indeterminacy of laughter, as well as its capacity to do things *of its own accord*. The leverage of thinking in terms of laughter-refrains therefore, are in conceptualising moments of laughter as (repeated) reference points around which bodies, experiences and space times can acquire resonance (Gerlach, 2015). In other words, refrains capture laughter’s capacity to do *something*, without necessarily determining what that something might be. Indeed, as the next section demonstrates, what laughter-refrains actually do can sometimes be something of a surprise – mobilising actions and affections that have very different trajectories to those that humour theories might suggest.

## Care home laughter

This section discusses laughter as a refrain through drawing on a series of events that occurred during two periods of ethnographic research conducted as part of a larger project that examine laughter within residential nursing homes for older people in the UK.

The UK care sector is vast, with roughly 20,000 care homes (Oscar Research, 2016) providing full time medical/social care for around 300,000 people over the age of 65 (Smith, 2016). There are several types of care home in terms of: ownership – private, local authority, or volunteer run; funding for care – NHS (government funded), privately funded, or private insurance funding; and type of care – nursing (with full time medical nurse), or residential (Lievesley et al., 2011). There are also a number of excellent studies that examine the geographies of institutions of care, for the most part concentrating on themes of provision and access, power dynamics, mobilities of workers, and emotional/affective geographies of living and working within the care sector (e.g. Andrews et al., 2005; Conradson, 2003; England, 2010; Milligan and Wiles, 2010; Raghuram, 2012).

Most of the events described occurred within a nursing home located near to Birmingham, UK, where I conducted a period of participant-observation between September and December 2015, (voluntarily) working full-time alongside carers, nurses, caterers, housekeepers and of course residents. McMorran (2012: 493) sets out the advantages of researchers “becoming a body at work” in that it allows insights into the “unspoken aspects of work and work-places that are difficult to address in interviews, surveys and other methods that are removed from the workplace context and its practices”, but also in taking the body seriously, both as a key site for labour and as a tool for research. Researching through the body is also a key mechanism for “witnessing” emotional and affectual rhythms, fluxes, and atmospheres (Dewsbury, 2003) and is thus crucial for understanding laughter within care settings. Alongside the experiences within this care home, I spent a ten-day period in January 2016 travelling with a professional theatre company who were touring a pantomime version of “Beauty and The Beast” around care settings across the UK. Shows of this kind are common within the care industry, usually “sold” as having medical and/or social benefits for residents. This period was again a “working” ethnography however I did not perform in any of the shows, instead helping to erect and dismantle the stages and watching the actual shows from the audience.

As with all research in sensitive settings such as care homes, various ethical concerns arise. In this research, many of the practical ethical issues were mediated through the ENRICH (Enabling Research in Care Homes) network – a national organisation of which the care home was a member. As such the home already had certain structures in place around anonymity and consent, as well as safeguarding procedures for both researcher and participants, into which a specific ethical review for this project was incorporated. The homes I visited with the theatre group were contacted prior to my arrival and all gave verbal consent for the research to take place. My position as a researcher remained open to all staff, residents, family members and other visitors, and indeed my role as a researcher became the basis for many jokes both in the care home and with the theatre group. In writing up the empirics in this article, I follow conventions used when writing up case studies around elderly care. Workers are referred to by a single name whereas residents are referred to as Mr/Mrs followed by a letter.<sup>3</sup> For additional protection, both the names and letters used are pseudonyms. Due to the less stringent ethical procedures, I include only minimal details about the “theatre group home” and people within it.

The empirical elements presented below are categorised into three thematic sections. The first demonstrates the ways in which laughter-refrains are both transpersonal and atmospheric and thus how they can generate a sense of collective subjectivity. The second section describes a moment where the effects of laughter diverge from the assumed effects of the humour that provokes it. The third section juxtaposes two similar moments to show the indeterminacies within laughter-refrains, and how the “same” laughter can generate



multiple affections in different bodies, depending on their situations (both present and historical). As such, whilst there are elements of humour in all the examples laid out, the emphasis rests on the advantages of maintaining analytic focus on laughter itself.

### *Laughter without humour*

I am sitting in the dining room feeding breakfast to Mrs S with a number of other carers and residents. The room is fairly calm and quiet so Laura decides to put some music on. She presses the button, there is a click and a whirring of the CD in the drive. Suddenly, the calmness of the room is shattered by an eruption from the speakers as ABBA's 'Dancing Queen' blares out. At this exact moment, Mary arrives, wheeling Mrs. F in front of her. Both of them are in fits of laughter, Mrs F rocking back and forth in her wheelchair and Mary half folded at the waist, tears glinting in the corner of her eyes. They had been laughing all the way downstairs and as they enter the dining room, their guffaws and giggles combine with the sound of Swedish Pop, creating an excess of jovial energy that instantly fills the room. The whole room is suddenly in a state of laughter. I can't stop myself, it just comes from my belly and out of my mouth, a hearty laugh that shakes my whole body. I look up at Nina – she catches my eye – her face creases up – her laugh intensifies. Then the same thing with Tara, then Mrs S, then Mrs H, Karen, and Laura. The room, the walls and tables almost pulsate – a crescendo of laughter and music moving around like a wave. I sit in the middle of it all shaking and gasping for air. Slowly over the next few minutes the laughter fades back, my breathing returns to normal. The room itself remains thick with a certain tension, and from time to time bursts of laughter punctures the air only to be quickly stifled by sharp intakes of breath...

- Field Diary, 20 October 2015

This encounter with laughter provides an overt example of *laughter*, rather than humour, generating actions and affections within bodies. There is no joke present. I found out later that a perfume bottle had broken which meant Mrs F had been covered in perfume, providing the initial catalyst for hers and Mary's laughter, but this remained unknown at the time.

Laughter thus forms a refrain here through which the expressive relations between bodies can be redefined, realigned, and reterritorialised. It draws out an atmospheric territory which is physically and affectively felt within and across different bodies, causing them to crease, fold, rock, shake, sway, and of course laugh. The laughter fills the space of the dining room with waves and bursts of jovial energies of differing intensities, forming a "unique totality that incorporates individual bodies by subsuming them within an assemblage of forces" (Duff, 2016: 64). Of these forces sonorous sensations are clearly central, yet they act alongside other modes of bodily expression – the glancing and catching of eyes, and the crumpling of faces – and constellations of music, food, smells of perfume, wheelchairs, and other affective intensities and memories (of the earlier calm and quietness for instance).

The laughter-refrain draws all of the bodies in the dining room into a new relational assemblage characterised by common affection (Edensor, 2012). We were no longer individual bodies but instead, what Bataille and Nancy might call a community of laughers (Parvulescu, 2010). The example shows how laughter can become the primary way through which bodies relate to one another and space itself. It is important to recognise however that laughter-refrains can also mobilise bodies in similar, yet smaller and more subtle ways, generating affections in just a few people within a larger set.

Sarah and Kate are hoisting Mrs P into her chair. All three are laughing about something (I'm not sure what exactly). I am talking to Barbara and watching them out of the corner of my eye.

Suddenly I let out a little laugh myself. Mrs P looks directly at me, “Why you laughing?” she asks. I feel too rude to admit that it is just because they are...

- Field Diary, 12 November 2015

Here, the three women’s laughter draws me in, even though I am not involved in the joke. Once again, we can start to see how laughter-refrains can move bodies in ways that are not necessarily related to humour, through a contagious laughter. The spatialities of this laughter-refrain displays atmospheric characteristics through its dispersal out across the lounge and creation of affective proximity between the group and myself, rhythmically aligning my body with theirs, eliciting a moment of “shared” laughter (Edensor, 2012; Macpherson, 2008). Yet what we also glimpse within this encounter is a sense of indeterminacy within the laughter-refrain – the ways it affects (or doesn’t) bodies differently. Although there were several other people in the lounge, I seemed to be the only one who was prompted to laugh. The reason for my “openness” here is probably due to my positionality – my research focus making me more attuned to laughter and thus more likely to be affected by it – however the differences demonstrate a key element in responding to critiques of the “universalising” tendencies of some affective thinking (Tolia-Kelly, 2006) through recognising the differing capacities of bodies to be affected by atmospheres (Bissell, 2010) depending (in part at least) on their positions, situations or orientations (Ahmed, 2006; Nayak, 2010).

### *Laughter beyond humour*

Although never stated, care home entertainments, such as pantomime performances, are arguably constituted by refrains. Usually based around artistic performance – such as music, comedy, dance, magic, or mixtures of these – they are intended to enact sensations (both perceptive and affective) that deterritorialise the “ordinary” feel of care home spaces and reterritorialise an atmosphere that feels more “enjoyable”. Several indeterminacies exist that affect capacity of shows to do this however, particularly surrounding what Sharpe et al. (2014) term the capacity of performers to “habituate” their audience. Within the shows that I witnessed, many residents had dementia and therefore found it difficult to engage with the performances. Similarly, a reduced capacity to hear meant that several struggled to follow the plot and thus maintain interest. Some residents did not necessarily wish to be present but were often “forced” to watch shows, unable to leave due to needing mobility assistance. Several times I overheard, or was told statements, such as “I hate pantomimes,” or “this is not very good,” and in one case “I wish they hadn’t brought me in here” – again reducing engagement from audiences and often meaning that shows struggled to provide their intended outcomes.

The actors themselves, at times, would also struggle to engage with the performance, often due to unresponsive audiences, but also because of the physical and mental fatigue that performing and travelling for months at a time can cause:

The third show of the day is turning out to be slightly sluggish. We are in a care home for people with dementia and mobility impairments. The cast look to be a little bored of each other and the performance – probably tiredness from the two shows earlier today, the driving, and the months of being on the road. The jokes from the start of the show have produced very few laughs – it definitely feels like a care home rather than ‘the theatre’. “The Beast” enters the stage... He looks slightly unkempt his shirt is supposed to be tucked in neatly but hangs down slightly from the side and has become increasingly creased by being stuffed into a suitcase throughout the day.

Suddenly a voice is audible towards the back of the room as one man turns to his neighbour and says, loud enough for the whole room to hear, “what a scruff!” For just a moment there is a palpable tension in the room and then all of a sudden laughter erupts – residents, carers, actors, and me – deep and uncontrollable. The cast can no longer carry on, corpsing every time they try to get going again. When they do manage, there is a noticeable change, the audience seem to sit up a little straighter, eyes more focussed on the performance and the next few jokes prompt a much greater response. Together we are taken from a care home in Birmingham to a magical world of Beauties, Beasts, talking candlesticks and clocks...

- Field Diary, 18 January 2016

This show was characterised by two different qualities of “felt” experience: the first, of tiredness, subdued bodies, and slight disinterest; the second is more attentive, allowing for a “magical” and immersive atmosphere. The movement between the two sets of experience thus marks a deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation of bodies’ ways of being and becoming in the care home – qualities suggestive of the show as a refrain. It is however, more specifically, the laughter within the example above that serves to disrupt or interrupt the unfolding experience (Brigstocke, 2014; Dawney, 2013). Laughter here, can also be thought of as a refrain – a refrain within a refrain – that reterritorialises bodies around new matters of affective and corporeal expression that are distinctly atmospheric (Stewart, 2011).

Within this example, there is a clear joke present, yet in many ways it exemplifies the argument set out in this paper: that there is an advantage to thinking “beyond the joke” *even if one is present*. While it is possible to interpret this laughter in terms of humour theory, particularly superiority – laughter as emerging from a ridiculing of the scruffiness of “The Beast” – there is a disjuncture between the theories of laughter and its actual workings. Superiority theory is usually associated with feelings of power for laughers, over those who are laughed at, yet in this instance the actions produced by this encounter with laughter seem to demonstrate a bringing together of all the bodies (including “The Beast”) rather than separating them into different parts. “Nonrepresentational humour theories” might offer another reading, suggesting that humour here mobilises a vitality within the space thus generating “other” affective experiences (including laughter) (Brigstocke, 2014). I would suggest however that it is instead the *event of laughter* itself in this situation that mobilises the shifts in atmosphere, in a similar manner to that of the previous section and that what is actually at stake is here is *laughter’s* capacity to generate its own trajectories that exceed both humour and the intentionalities of the jokers and laughers themselves (Hughes, 2016; Williams, 2016).

### *Witnessing laughter*

Within the laughter-refrains discussed thus far, my body has formed an active component – always joining in with the act of laughing. While this was not an uncommon experience, there were many more instances where I encountered laughter but did not laugh myself. Although these occurred throughout the home, certain space times seemed more likely associated with them, notably during personal-care tasks such as washing, dressing, and assisting residents going to the toilet. These laughs exceed the spaces in which they occur, often audibly passing through the care home’s doors, walls, ceiling, and floors, as the laughter extends ever outwards. My field notes describing these encounters are full of indicators of activity and affect – the sound of laughter as making me feel: “nice”, “pleased”, “less bored”, “less lonely”, “intrigued”, “cheerier”; or making me: “skip”, “sing”, “hum”, or “smile” – which demonstrate de/reterritorialisations as my body becomes enveloped by the affective sensations of laughter shared by others (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988; McCormack, 2013).

Another locus for laughter in the home was around staff breaks. Most breaks happened in the dining room due to the staff room being around five minutes' walk from the main working areas and so going there was seen to "eat into" the break itself. A certain flexibility in the ways that the space of the dining room is engaged at different times is therefore necessary. Laughter-refrains are important in this, enacting a deterritorialisation of the room as a work space and a reterritorialisation of it as a break space with different emotional and affective practices and attachments.

I walk into the dining room where some carers are sat at a table having a break. "Join us!" they call over to me, and for the first time in the three weeks I have been here I get to sit down and have an 'official' break. Today has been running smoothly, everyone is in a good mood. The carers sit chatting to each other and eating a plate of biscuits. It is nice, they are 'bantering' and making fun of each other a little while they talk about stuff that is going on at home. Moments of laughter pepper the conversation, short intense bursts at relatively consistent intervals which start to blend into one another. Each one seems to relax the muscles in my back and sooth my feet a little. I smile, remaining silent, bathing in the laughter rather than joining in myself...

- Field Diary, 29 October 2015

The atmosphere is again clear within this moment – I can "bathe" in it; it affects my body – physically relaxing my muscles and creating feelings of enjoyment, rest, inclusion. Laughter, although not the only element of this atmosphere, marks the refrain around which it territorialised. On my preliminary visit to the home, one carer told me "we do laugh a lot here, especially over a brew [cup of tea]". The "causes" of this laughter are varied: "banter", joking, story-telling, watching videos together on YouTube. Yet, regardless of their cause, many of the breaks I was involved in share a similar affective imprint, feelings which mark those space times out as breaks rather than work. These atmospheres of laughter can again be seen a refrain through which the space of the dining room can be creatively transformed and repurposed, and within which bodies can do different things, perform different actions, affect and be affected in different ways.

As noted above however, laughter is never bound within a particular space – overflowing individual rooms meaning people will experience it from different locations, positions, and situations: "we may walk into a room and 'feel the atmosphere', but what we may feel depends on the angle of our arrival" (Ahmed, 2008: 125). To demonstrate this, I juxtapose this first encounter with a staff break with a different one. The laughter events themselves are very similar, but experienced from different locations, and thus produce palpably different affective experiences.

I am sitting in the little lounge talking quietly with Mr H. Three of the carers are on break at a table just inside the dining room, the murmur of their conversation buzzing away in the background. I can't see them but an open archway connects the two rooms and Mr H can just about see them from where he is sat. Suddenly a cackle of laughter erupts from their table, reverberating through the archway and into the lounge. Mr H's face lights up, the corner of his mouth creeping upwards and his eyes widening. He turns towards them join in, shouting "what's that?" One of the carer's faces appears in the archway as she rocks her chair backwards. Without noting what he said, she automatically replies "we are on break [Mr H], we will come in five minutes" and she swung forwards again, seeming to think nothing of it. A second or two passes, the murmuring continues, and then again, a second wave of laughter washes outwards from them and into the room. His face falls again, seeming to grey, I feel his pain, his isolation, his rejection. My body tenses, he obviously no longer wants to chat...

- Field Diary, 5 December 2015

Both encounters with breaks can be seen as “arrivals” (Ahmed, 2008). The first is a literal arrival as I enter a room, the second emerges as laughter spills-over into an adjacent room. Clearly each of these events affect bodies in different ways – I am easily incorporated into the first; Mr H is rejected and thus restricted by the second. We must therefore recognise the contingent nature of the various material/affective forces that compose laughter-refrains, and particularly the ways in which the arrival of a new body requires a creative “re-composition” – either to destroy or incorporate that body’s forces (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). The second encounter also demonstrates the fleeting nature of these compositions and the way that they can enact multiple “trajectories” that produce different affective responses and relational experiences, at different times. Initially Mr H experiences a positive affection – his face lights up, he turns to them, he is feeling positive, included, wants to join in – yet he is rejected and therefore the second burst of laughter produces a negative affection – his face drops, there is exclusion, isolation, his actions become limited, and he no longer wants to talk to me. This reiterates the point that atmospheric laughter-refrains are not homogenous entities but are rather a multiplicity of material and affective qualities, trajectories and intensities, capable of shifting and thus affecting bodies differently at different times (Edensor, 2015).

It is therefore imperative to recognise the importance of bodily, and thus spatial, differences. In the first encounter, I am incorporated into the atmosphere of laughter, in part because I can enter the space of the table without physical assistance – distinguishing me from most residents. I am also identified as “worker” and thus seen as entitled to a break, a chance to rest my body and mind in the same way as “regular” workers. Mr H does not have the same potential. Not only is he physically unable to move into the room and thus must shout to try and join in, but as a resident his body is layered with meaning (both representational and nonrepresentational) that designate him as “work,” and thus beyond the realms of what constitutes a break space. We can start to see how laughter-refrains are not only enacted within the bounds of the spaces in which they occur but also the ways in which they, alongside a myriad of social, material, and discursive resources (Duff, 2010), can produce space itself – although a space that might not feel the same for everyone within it.

## Discussion: From ethics to “ethos”

Attending to and through affect points to the importance of cultivating an ethical sensibility responsive as much to the transformative potential of the event as to the subject and object of ethics. (McCormack, 2003: 500)

All the examples discussed above demonstrate laughter as imbued with productive or creative force (Williams, 2016) which interacts with other forces (material, social, affective) to produce particular power relations. These power relations in turn have the capacity to transform the structure and feel of space – producing atmospheres that are “jovial” (during the breakfast), “magical” (during the pantomime), “relaxing” (during the first break), or “tense” and “alienating” (during the second); as well as the relations of bodies within it – their capacities for action and affection. As such, each laughter-refrain forms an event with particular ethical implications in terms of its ability to expand or restrict what bodies can do within space (Braidotti, 2011) which are contextualised in part, by the geographies within which they occur.

As noted above, this approach has already been applied in order to analyse *humour* as an event (Bissell et al., 2012; Brigstocke, 2014; Hynes and Sharpe, 2010; Sharpe et al., 2014), *sometimes* also seeming to depict what is happening during events of laughter. Yet as the



examples above demonstrate laughter itself can enact trajectories that exceed humorous intentionality and therefore prompt different outcomes to those suggested by humour theories. As such there is a clear need to think beyond humour in order to attend to laughter itself (even when humour is present).

Thinking of laughter in terms of atmospheres and refrains provides a vehicle through which to do this. The refrain in particular renders laughter as indeterminate, contingent and multiple: sometimes laughter produces outcomes in ways that might be expected; yet at others, it seems to produce something “unexpected” and new (Williams, 2016). Within the pantomime event for example, we see a moment of “superiority” humour, yet, in contrast, a laughter that disrupts assumed power geometries, flowing from laughter to laughed-at (Douglas, 2015), seeming to unite bodies, rather than separating them. Similarly, moments where laughter is encountered by bodies together, are often depicted as affecting bodies with “joy”, increasing their capacities for action and affection (Brigstocke, 2014; Hynes et al., 2007; Macpherson, 2008; Routledge, 2012) which we see within the staff break that I am directly involved in. Yet the juxtaposition with the other break, which is anchored around a similar laughter-refrain, demonstrates that the “same” laughter can sometimes also be restricting of these same capacities. Overall, this sense of indeterminacy means that attempting to develop an understanding of laughter’s power based on codified rules, which might dictate its “appropriateness” in certain spaces and times, seems somewhat unsatisfactory – especially an understanding that relies analytically on humour.

As such there is a clear need to cultivate a further level of precision in understanding the transformative potential of the “*event of laughter*” (whether situated within humour or not) in order to attend to the ethics of laughter itself, in both spatial and corporeal terms. Popke (2009) notes that nonrepresentational theories offer new opportunities for thinking of ethics, not as a set of moral principles, but rather as an “ethos” (also Popke, 2006), through which we might offer a more generous conception of what constitutes good or bad encounters (see also Darling, 2010). I would therefore argue that, given its indeterminacy, we must cultivate an “ethos” for laughter that is attuned to an ontology of the in-between (Bille et al., 2015; Duff, 2016), a sense of the unknown (Bataille and Michelson, 1986) and the “surprise of life” (Anderson, 2014) – through which we can recognise laughter as able to create its *own* trajectories, contexts and subjectivities, at both individual and collective registers (Lawtoo, 2011; Nancy, 1993). In this way, we can be more precise in our ethical assessments of the singularity of events of laughter (McCormack, 2003), whilst accounting for the different powers, forces, bodies, scales and orientations, that make each singular event always also plural (Nancy, 2000).

## Conclusion

A simple movement can change everything. The movement of thought away from humour, for example, shifts the ways in which we can describe, discuss, and understand laughter. The “meaning of laughter” is rendered meaningless because, as we have seen, laughter is always in excess of itself (Anderson, 2014; Bataille and Michelson, 1986), always expressing more-than its representations, always indeterminate and unfinished (Gerlach, 2015). Events of laughter themselves also emerge from simple movements, which implicate the geographies of the body: the locations of “its” subjectivities, “its” consciousness, and “its” emotions; but also, the ways in which it becomes orientated in relation to spaces, places, and other bodies.

This article has thus offered a critique of the ways in which research around laughter is mostly theorised in terms of humour, and suggested a means through which we might “return” to thinking about laughter itself (Parvulescu, 2010). In doing this, I have utilised atmospheres



and refrains as concepts that can articulate laughter – as a transpersonal, material and affective force, around which relationalities between bodies come into being and thus space times are produced (McCormack, 2013). I have highlighted the indeterminacies or uncertainties within these processes, that emerge from laughter's capacity to produce its own trajectories in ways that exceed humour and the intentionalities of laughers themselves (Hughes, 2016). In some ways, my push to think laughter beyond humour, evokes Bataille's argument: that laughter is as closely linked to experiences of death, sex or religious experience, as it is to humour.<sup>4</sup> My intention has been however, to not to go quite that far – instead accepting a close relation between humour and laughter, although adamantly affirming that *humour and laughter are not the same phenomenon*.

In making this argument, I have therefore described a series of events of laughter within nursing care homes that demonstrate some of these potentials, showing how laughter-refrains can enact de/reterritorialisations (capable of drawing bodies together and pushing them apart) in ways that interrupt the actual and assumed/imagined power geometries generated by humour and its theories, and which implicate bodily difference within them. Laughter can be thought of not simply as a *choice* of happiness (as the Coca-Cola advert suggests) but instead as imbued with a much more complex set of ethical sensibilities. I have therefore argued for a more precise analysis of laughter: both in attending to the transformative potential of laughter itself, not just the humorous moments that precede it; and in thinking about the indeterminate ethics of more-than just those who are laughing, through considering the many different bodies who may be witnessing the laughter also.

Ultimately, all of this may seem like a minor shift in thinking, yet the context of the empirical examples points towards its potential magnitude. Often when thinking about laughter in care settings, scholarship has searched for its functions or purposes (e.g. Adams and McGuire, 1986; Leiber, 1986; Mallett, 1995; Mora-Ripoll, 2010), usually to promote its use as a social or therapeutic tool, mostly declaring laughter to be a universal good. These studies again either analyse in terms of humour, or through measuring cognitive patterns of people who are laughing. As such, I would argue, in line with other nonrepresentational scholarship around therapeutic atmospheres (Duff, 2016; Gorman, 2016; McCormack, 2003; Williams, 2002) that there is a need here to think more fully about the *multiplicities* within the singularity of each event (of laughter) (Nancy, 2000): about the totality of the assemblages it is de/reterritorialises, and thus about the different directions it is encountered from (including ones that might not be being “measured”). In doing this, we might discover that laughter, even if encountered from just around the corner, often has ethical potentials that are very different and more complex than those which initially appear.

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## Notes

1. I am grateful to Naeemah Yusof for bringing this to my attention. The full video is available to view on YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=1veWbLpGa78](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1veWbLpGa78)
2. Brigstocke (2014) offers a list of other philosophers who also note this quality in laughter.
3. See: [www.ombudsman.org.uk/care-and-compassion/case-studies/](http://www.ombudsman.org.uk/care-and-compassion/case-studies/)
4. As one reviewer rightly pointed out.

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